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Date of Confirmation	5th July, 2011
Title of the Research	Adaptations of Selected Novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens into Films: A Study of Changes in Narrative

Synopsis on

Adaptations of Selected Novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens into Films: A Study of Changes in Narrative

Submitted to:

Symbiosis International University

Pune

Topic: The Adaptation of Classic Novels into Films: A Study of Narrative Changes with Special reference to Selected Novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens

Films adapted from novels very often invite unfavourable comparison with the original literary works from critics, reviewers as well as the common movie-goers. Critics might think that such films have an inherent flaw as they are not original compositions meant for a cinematic experience. The audience might react unfavourably to some of the superficial differences. They might regret the inevitable compression of the novel which might leave out their favourite scenes or they might also disapprove of the casting for the different characters. Just as a novel might have as many different readings of its narrative as there are readers, a film adaptation might be regarded in the same light, as the film-maker's own 'reading' of the novel.

Rationale and significance of the study:

This brings us to a very important aspect of the process of adaptation. How is the narrative of a novel adapted for a film? The basic theme of the narrative might remain the same, but as the medium changes, the narrative also changes its structure and form drastically. When a novel is adapted into a film, it is not just a matter of pulling dialogue from the pages of a book. In novels, we often come to know characters best not through what they say, but through what they are thinking or what is said about them in the narration. A narrator mediates the meaning of what

we read through his or her point of view: But in a film, the narrator largely disappears. Sometimes a narrator's perspective is kept through the use of a voice-over, but generally the director, cast, and crew must rely on the other tools of film-making to reproduce what was felt, thought, and described on the page. The major difference between books and films is that visual images stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words can do this indirectly. Film is a more sensory experience than reading – besides verbal language, there is also colour, movement, and sound. Yet film is also limited: for one thing, there are no time constraints on a novel, while a film must generally compress events into two hours or so. For another, the meaning of a novel is controlled by only one person – the author – while the meaning we get from a film is the result of a collaborative effort by a large number of people. Film also does not allow us the same freedom a novel does – to interact with the plot or characters by imagining them in our minds. For some viewers, this is often the most frustrating aspect of turning a novel into a film.

Films adapted especially from classic novels are often considered to be inferior to the original literary work. People who have read a classic novel feel that the film was not ‘faithful’ to the original work. George Bluestone, who is famous for his pioneering work in this field, believed that: ‘a filmist doesn’t convert a novel at all; he uses a paraphrase of the novel.’ Many other critics and even the common viewers believe that films cannot treat the original classics with the kind of respect they deserve. The issue of ‘fidelity’ has been discussed a lot. How ‘faithful’ a film is to its original source is many times considered to be the only criterion to judge it.

The medium of films is unique in the sense that it is much more versatile than the book, but it does not allow us the same freedom of thought and imagination as the book does. The novels allow us the freedom to create and imagine the world that the writer is describing in our own unique way, while the film shows us the world as the film-maker sees it, as the screen-writer interprets it and as the actors portray it in all its concreteness without leaving us the scope to use our own imagination.

It will be interesting to see whether this is always true or whether sometimes even a film-maker can handle the narrative of a classic novel in such a way that he gives us ample scope to interpret it in the our own way.

Why Jane Austen and Charles Dickens?

This research tries to study the adaptations based on the novels of two of the most famous authors who have inspired film-makers for all these years. They have been the favourites of film-makers for a long time now. They both wrote novels that were 'film friendly'. Dickens's episodic novels published in the form of a serial are full of cliffhanger moments. His pictorial style of narrative, full of visual appeal and evoking lifelike images within the mind, can be effectively adapted into a film. Austen's novels, though more dialogic than pictorial, still have the ability of creating the scene in front of our eyes.

It will be interesting to see how different film-makers handle the pictorial aspect of Dickens or the special human touch of Austen. In addition to the interesting conversations, one of the reasons Jane Austen novels film so well is the dancing, colour, movement and music present in her novels through descriptions of the

various balls and social gatherings attended by the characters. The novels of Dickens, on the other hand, are full of highly dramatic moments that make for truly interesting film versions. But their novels are not only about this. The tongue-in-cheek comments that Jane Austen makes on the follies and foibles of the contemporary society and Dickens's handling of the biting realities of a harsh and seemingly unkind world along with his concern for social reform is something that might prove challenging to handle in a film adaptation. I think that a study of the adaptations based on the novels of these two eminent classic writers will provide informative and interesting insights into the art of adaptation with special reference to narrative techniques.

Aims and objectives of the study:

It is the aim of this research to see the factors that lead to changes in the narrative when a novel is turned into a film. The research will try to find out how the adaptations of selected novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens have been affected by the following factors of narrative transition:

1. Changes necessitated by the new medium and the issue of 'fidelity'

   Films and literature have their own distinct ways of manipulating the structure of the narrative. A novel might show the change in time and place by starting a new chapter, while a movie will use techniques like flash-backs, dissolves, etc. Some works are very difficult to adapt because they pose the challenge of changing narratives that are often more about ideas than events and making them dramatic for the screen.

2. The changes in theme and characters:

   Sometimes filmmakers make changes because they want to focus on themes that are not given prominence in the original work. They also want to emphasize different traits in a character as characters affect the tone and structure of the narrative.

3. The Point of view used by the film-maker:

   The question of point-of-view is also important. Does the film-maker retain the same ‘focalizer’ used by the novelist, or change him/her completely? For example, all of Jane Austen’s novels are written in the third person narrative. But what happens if a film-maker decides to present the story through one of the characters instead. It will be interesting to find out what point of view the film-makers have used in their adaptation of Austen and Dickens novels.

4. How the mind of the character is revealed:

   A novelist can describe the mental processes that a character experiences or the psychology of the character in great details. The novelist can use pages to describe all the minute changes in the psyche of his characters, all his/her mental trials and tribulations by taking us directly into their minds. It is also important for a film-maker that he explains the mental processes of the characters he is presenting on screen. Only then can we understand the motives behind the actions and decisions of the characters. But a film-maker has to deal with the audio-visual medium of films which makes it very difficult for him to show the abstract mental processes

5. What factors affect changes in the use of language and imagery:

   Does the film continue with the same language used in the novel or does it make any changes in it and why.

6. Catering to the needs of the Contemporary audience:

   Some changes are inspired by a desire to make the original story interesting and relevant to a contemporary audience. The film version of a classic novel may bear almost no resemblance to the original in setting and language, yet it may still be a faithful translation of the characters and themes.

7. The handling of descriptive passages:

   Both Austen and Dickens have written descriptive passages in their novels. Sometimes descriptive passages seem to halt the narrative when the most interesting action sequence is going on and the reader is waiting with bated breath to read what happens next. A writer can devote 2-3 paragraphs to the description of nature, or the detailed description of the physical appearance of a character, but how does a film-maker deal with this?

8. The period in which the novel was filmed:

   The period in which the novel was filmed will also affect the way the film portrays the original narrative. A film-maker many times tries to cater to the norms prevalent in a particular era and may consequently have to change the details of the original narrative.

The study of these various factors that affect movie interpretations of classic novels will bring to light the techniques of adapting the narrative of classic fiction to films.

Selection of novels and films:

The research proposes to analyse the following novels and film adaptations based on them.

Jane Austen

- Pride and Prejudice
- Sense and Sensibility
- Emma

Charles Dickens

- Oliver Twist
- David Copperfield
- Great Expectations

Hypothesis:

This research plans to take a closer look at the ‘narrative’ as the main component that undergoes interesting and often drastic changes when a novel is turned into a film. The research proposes to explore the various factors (mentioned in the aims and objectives above) that affect these narrative changes, especially in the very widely filmed novels of Austen and Dickens. It will try to find out whether the novels of Dickens, being more descriptive in nature, are more difficult to film, while the novels of Austen, based mainly on dialogues and thoughts of the characters, require a completely different kind of handling in the film form. It is also the purpose of this research to find out whether the narrative changes always affect the original story adversely, or sometimes they give us interesting insights into the original classic by

presenting it from an exciting and new perspective. The research is based on the hypothesis that the common saying, ‘great novels make for a mediocre film’ may not always be true. A great book creates many films that may come up with equally interesting and unique interpretations of the same novel.

Research methods:

This research will be based on a detailed examination of the narrative techniques used in the novel as well as the film based on the novel in order to compare the two. The researcher will try to address the various aspects of narrative techniques by reading the novel carefully and then watching the films based on it to note down the narrative changes and the factors affecting it. The research would refer to established narrative theories but try to reach its own conclusions about the main topic. It will also try to find out why films based on classic novels are seldom enjoyed by the spectators especially if they have already read the novel and will try to determine whether the reaction of the reader is always negative to a film adaptation.

Possible sections of the thesis:

The research might be divided broadly into the following parts or sections.

1. Introduction: Discussing the basic premises on which the research is based and the aims of the same.
2. A comparison of film and fiction narrative: A basic description of how the two mediums require different kinds of narrative strategies and techniques with an in-

depth study of the possible narrative changes that film as an audio-visual medium might require.

3. Discussion of the narrative changes in adaptations based on the novels of Jane Austen: This part will focus on the special changes that the novels of Austen demanded or generated and how much they were influenced by the director's individual perception.
4. Discussion of the narrative changes in adaptations based on the novels of Charles Dickens: This discussion will try to apply the findings about narrative changes from the second section to actual works and analyse each and every factor contributing to these changes.
5. A comparison of the adaptations of Dickens and Austen novels to identify some common factors that affect the narrative and also to see if the different writing styles of these two authors necessitated a different handling of the issues. This will be followed by the conclusion that will discuss the main outcome of the study and its applicability to the narrative techniques of films in general.

Scope and Uniqueness of the study:

The theory of adaptation has been in circulation for quite some time now as almost every film needs a story as its basis. The enduring love for films based on classic novels is evident and many people have discussed the issues of 'fidelity'. This research proposes to focus on narrative aspects and by doing so tries to go to the roots of the factors influencing the adaptations of classic novels. Austen and Dickens have been favourites of researchers all over the world, yet hardly any of the

research deals with the narrative changes that the films based on their novels demand or generate. The detailed comparison of various film versions of their novels that this research proposes, would throw light on the scope and limitations of the print as well as the audio-visual medium.

This research will also try to find out the narrative changes made in films always affect the original story adversely, or sometimes they give us interesting insights into the original classic by presenting it from an exciting new perspective. For example, the modern movie version of Jane Austen's 'Emma' is called 'clueless'. It has a modern setting where Emma is a club going fashionable girl and yet the movie seems to retain the same themes of the original novel.

I think the uniqueness of this proposed research lies in the fact that it will provide new insights into the narrative techniques used by different film-makers while adapting the novels by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. This study will be useful for future film-makers as well as students of film studies and literature as it will be a comprehensive discussion of the various factors affecting the narrative changes that occur during the process of adaptation.

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